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Metacontingencies and Cultural Practices: A Review of *Behavioral Analysis of Societies and Cultural Practices,* edited by P. A. Lamal

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"Let him extrapolate who will" invited Skinner in *The Behavior of Organisms* (1938). In *Walden Two* (1948), *Science and Human Behavior* (1953), *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971), and elsewhere (Skinner, 1987), he did exactly this.

With the formation of the Association for Behavior Analysis (ABA) and its predecessor the Midwestern Association for Behavior Analysis (MABA) during the politically fecund 1970s, many papers were given and articles written that carried the radical behaviorist approach to the analysis of society. The *Behaviorists for Social Action Journal,* and its successor *Behavior Analysis and Social Action,* were a part of this general effort. *The Behavior Analyst* and other behaviorist journals opened their pages to the topic. Attempts were made to integrate behavior analysis and cultural materialism, and Marvin Harris came to speak at ABA.

Arguably, Skinner's "Selection by Consequences" (1981) summarized the parameters for a radical behaviorist's understanding of society when he spoke of a third level of selection. At this level, cultural practices are selected by their consequences in a manner analogous to selection at the levels of biology and individual behavior.

Now, P. A. Lamal has published a collection of essays, *Behavior Analysis of Societies and Cultural Practices,* which is generally in this same tradition. Lamal states, "a major thesis of this book is that the working assumptions, constructs and methods of behavior analysis can and should now be extended to societies and cultural practices" (p. xiii). While acknowledging other work, Lamal says, "no single source incorporating the concepts and principles underlying this extension ... includ[ing] examples of the extensions has appeared before this book" (p. xiii).

The book is divided into three parts. Part I presents, in the words of the author, "the concepts and principles of behavior analysis [of] societies and cultural practices" (p. xiii). Part II "presents diverse examples ... [that] describe the contingencies and metacontingencies operating in and characterizing various societies and cultural practices" (p. xiii). Part III "considers the context of behavior analysis of societies and cultural practices within the larger context of behavior analysis ... [and] the future of this subdiscipline" (p. xiii).

Part I, *Principles,* begins with a short introduction by Lamal that raises some of the issues to be covered later, such as the appropriate units of analysis and what measurements are to be used. Among other things, Lamal suggests that analysis may have to rely on data that are descriptive rather than experimental due to the fact that "we simply are not able to manipulate cultural practices" (p. 7). Lamal takes note of the fact that behavior analysis may not be able to bring about important cultural practices such as the redistribution of wealth and power. He also notes that some members of society may have a vested interest in the status quo that represents a problem to other members of society.

The second essay, by David Pierce, is quite readable and comprehensive. It covers a wide range of social data from "synthetic social relations" in laboratory

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pigeons to cultural practices by humans. Pierce organizes these data in a logical sequence and offers a behavior-analytic analysis. He discusses certain methodological problems generated by these kinds of data and offers several important practical suggestions as to the use of behavior analysis at the societal level. Pierce's chapter should be helpful to behavior analysts who are generally unfamiliar with this area.

Part I ends with Sigrid Glenn's seminal article on metacontingencies, the theoretical linchpin for almost all of Part II of the book. The article is a careful, well-articulated and logical progression to its apex, the concept of metacontingencies. The heart of this delineation is selection by consequences (Skinner, 1981). First, there is biological selection, then behavior selection, and finally the selection of cultural practices. A cultural practice begins when the behavior of one person becomes functionally related to the behavior of another person. Glenn calls these relationships "interlocking contingencies." When these interlocking contingencies produce behavior, such as building churches or making war, that is sustained across individuals and across generations, we have a cultural practice. The contingent relations between cultural practices and the outcomes of those practices are called metacontingencies.

The concept of metacontingencies is an heuristic one. In addition to specifying units of analysis, it suggests a mechanism for the selection of cultural practices analogous to the well-studied mechanisms that select individual behavior. It facilitates—and I believe this is of crucial importance—the continued analysis of society free from purpose, mentalism, or cognitive causality.

Glenn's essay is informed not only by behavior analysis but by the cultural materialism of Marvin Harris (Harris, 1979). The delineation of Harris's contributions constitutes a large part of the chapter and is an integral part of the "general scientific framework" Glenn offers for the rest of the book.

Part II, *Applications,* consists of nine papers. The first, by Lamal, and the second, by Richard Rakos, deal with the recent events in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Both articles are full of factual material, and one feels fortunate that we have behavior analysts so well informed on such matters. Lamal identifies certain metacontingencies in the Soviet Union and makes the case that they are responsible for the political and economic problems that existed when he wrote. He further suggests that "the rules responsible for these metacontingencies are to be found in Marxist ideology" (p. 78). He may be right. To explain change, Marx chose the Hegelian metaphor of dialectics rather than the Darwinian notion of selection. The "rules" formulated from dialectics show little appreciation for the controlling power of consequences.

This deficiency is in large measure the basis of much of Rakos's article. His target is socialism itself, using eastern Europe as a backdrop. His grand conclusion: "Capitalism, in so many ways, is not humane, but as my behavioral analysis implies, it is thoroughly human. Socialism, on the other hand, is clearly humane, but a scientific analysis suggests it is not really human" (p. 103). This article restates much of what Rakos has argued elsewhere; that is, that the contingencies of reinforcement under socialism are incompatible with human nature (Rakos, 1988). This position has not gone without challenge (Morrow, 1988; Ulman, 1988). There can be a fine line between "plausible" and "post hoc" explanations. Though Rakos generally stays on the right side of the line, I believe his analysis would appear stronger if it were buttressed by at least some prediction of events.

In the next two chapters, William Redmon and his coauthors, Leslie Wilk and Judy Agnew, offer a metacontingency analysis of public- and private-sector organizations. Redmon and Wilk conclude a well-written and coherent chapter with optimism. They suggest that the metacontingency analysis, coupled with existing analytical models such as Gilbert's performance engineering matrix and Brethower's total performance system, offer a framework for continued progress in

the field they call organizational behavior analysis (OBA).

Redmon and Agnew offer examples of metacontingency analysis in the private sector. They review compensation systems, feedback systems, training, and W. E. Deming's statistical process control. They describe current models of organizational behavior within the metacontingency framework. The chapter is a clear and helpful exposition of this area.

Joel Greenspoon provides an almost exhaustive overview of metacontingencies in higher education and does it well. In addition to describing tenure, promotion, scholarly activity, and so forth, within this framework, Greenspoon discusses such challenging questions as "conflicting metacontingencies."

Anthony Edwards's chapter on clinical practice cites some interesting data about the distribution and orientation of clinical psychologists. His efforts beyond that, however, could benefit from better organization and editing. The references are often of doubtful help to the reader. For example, the statement "The important global issues are described in . . ." is directly followed by 17 references, one of which is given "for a complete listing" of "Skinner's many publications" (p. 170). In addition, the author appears to confuse innate and respondent behavior (p. 175). To his credit, Edwards raises some useful and provocative questions and urges increased use of behavior analysis in the area of clinical practice.

Melbourne Hovell, Robert Kaplan, and Frank Hovell offer an enlightening and well-written account of preventive medical services in the United States. Although they do not cite Glenn or use the term *metacontingency,* they present an excellent analysis of contingencies of reinforcement relevant to the delivery of preventive medical services. In a subtlety that may or may not be of interest, the authors speak of behavior modification and not behavior analysis. They speak of the necessity to understand learning theory to employ behavior modification techniques correctly. Irrespective of this, Hovell, Kaplan, and Hovell present a solid analysis that delineates relevant variables controlling the behaviors about which they write.

Janet Ellis has written a superb chapter on the contingencies and metacontingencies in correctional settings. Her style is clear, logical, and is informed by behavior analysis and her own work in correctional settings. Ellis makes good use of Glenn's distinction between ceremonial and technologically maintained behavior to explain events whose causes often appear obscure. The chapter represents a comprehensive treatment of the subject.

John Kunkel ends Part II with an essay on "Apathy and Irresponsibility in Social Systems." Kunkel's writing is scholarly and perceptive. He offers his own analysis of social behavior, making use of what he calls a "behavior triad" and a "behavior lattice." In addition, he makes generous use of the notion of rule-governed behavior. These conceptualizations are used in conjunction with certain social psychology concepts such as attribution, locus of control, invulnerability, and the like to discuss social behavior.

Kunkel's chapter is interesting though atypical when compared to the others. He does not cite Harris, Skinner, or Glenn. Kunkel uses the term *metacontingency* only on the last page of his 20-page article, and then in a way that appears critical. He says, "The metacontingencies that supposedly guide people's actions do not exist only in a society's norms. *An equally important aspect of metacontingencies is people's perceptions of them.* Indeed, attribution research by social psychologists leads to the conclusion that such perceptions are crucial for many activities" (p. 238, emphasis added). Such locutions perhaps introduce a mentalistic perspective into the subject matter. This level of analysis appears throughout the chapter; many would find it of doubtful utility.

Part III, *The Future,* consists of a four-page article by Kunkel and Lamal called "The Road Ahead." It briefly calls on behavior analysts to venture beyond "single-subject analysis" and "controlled settings" and to "practice some humility while we donate proven principles and effective methods" (p. 245). In asking be-

havior analysts to be less insular, Kunkel and Lamal implore the field to make use of the "valuable sources of new data and methods" from "adjacent disciplines" (p. 246).

This is a good book that makes a positive contribution to behavior analysis and the developing literature on metacontingencies. It is not without shortcomings, however. Chapter 9, "Behavioral Analysis of Clinical Practice in the United States," by Edwards, should have been edited more carefully. In addition, considering the title of the book, I question the wisdom of including Kunkel's Chapter 12. Certainly behavior analysis must deal with the events that give rise to cognitive explanations (and Kunkel is to be thanked for introducing these data). But the cognitive explanations themselves should be saved for another space. The concept of metacontingencies derives from a theory and epistemology—radical behaviorism—that consciously eschew cognitive explanations. To counterpose cognitive explanations with metacontingencies is to miss this point. Kunkel's criticism should be of radical behaviorism, not metacontingencies. This is not to say that metacontingencies represents a noncriticizable concept. On the contrary, it is to say that criticism should come from a similar epistemology if it is to be helpful.

Metacontingencies, as a concept, must ultimately be justified on the basis of its usefulness toward the goal of the prediction—if not control—of cultural practices. I believe it shows great promise, but many issues remain. If we are to be taken seriously by persons interested in social change, I argue that we need a selectionist description and explanation of the events that give rise to the concept of "political power." We need to understand from a selectionist standpoint how political power changes. One appeal of Marx was his assertion that "the philosophers have *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to *change* it" (Engels, 1941, p. 84; emphasis in the original).

In the long run, what is needed is an analysis that will increase the likelihood of control of cultural practices. Ultimately, poverty should be controlled in the same manner by which we seek to control disease. The notion of metacontingencies is a step in the right direction, and Lamal's book is to be credited with furthering that end.

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